

MYSTERY STORY

2nd in a series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"
Ephesians 1:8-12

INTRODUCTION

I love some of the old classic mystery movies like *North By Northwest* and *Rear Window*. One of my all-time favorites is *Charade*, which stars Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn. In it, Hepburn plays Regina Lampert, a woman who returns to her home in Paris after a ski vacation and discovers that her husband is missing and her apartment is completely empty. All their belongings are gone. A police detective then informs her that her husband sold everything, took the money and left, but was murdered while leaving the city. Only there is no sign of the money.

A charming man named Peter Joshua whom she had met while skiing shows up and helps Reggie find a place to stay. At the funeral for her husband only the police detective and three rather scary men Reggie has never seen before show up. After the funeral Reggie is contacted by a CIA officer named Hamilton Bartholomew who tells Reggie that her husband had been part of an OSS team that went behind enemy lines during World War II. The team consisted of Charles, a man named Carson Dyle and the 3 men who showed up for the funeral. It turned out that the team was supposed to deliver \$250,000 in gold to the French Resistance, but instead they had stolen it. They were ambushed by German soldiers, Dyle was fatally wounded and Charles had escaped with the money. The three men were looking for the money. But Reggie had no idea where the money was. She went through all of his belongings and there was no sign of the cash. And that was a lot of cash. The movie was made in 1963, and \$250,000 then was the equivalent of over \$2 million today.

Reggie eventually learns that Peter Joshua is not who he claimed to be. Then the three men she saw at the funeral are murdered, one by one. I won't tell you how it turns out, but I will tell you the movie is full of mysteries. Who is killing the men of the former OSS team? Who is the man claiming to be Adam Canfield? And where is the money?

Mystery stories are very popular. Have you ever wondered why that is? I don't have the answer to that, but I wonder if at least one factor is that life itself often feels like a mystery. It's confusing and feels random so often. It's hard to make sense of it. Is it really going anywhere? Is it coherent? Does it mean anything? Sometimes it doesn't seem like it. It is mysterious in a lot of ways. So we like mysteries. It's kind of fun to find out the Bible talks about a mystery. Only it's not the kind of mystery we see in movies or read about in crime novels. It is a real life mystery that is at the very center of all that is happening in our world. It is a mystery that has direct relevance to our lives. This mystery is mentioned in Ephesians 1:8-12.

GOD REVEALED THE MYSTERY

Verses 8-9 tell us that in all wisdom and insight God has made known to us the mystery of his will. What is this about a mystery of God's will? There were some new religions called "mystery religions" sprouting up in the first century that were attracting attention. They had secret initiations and rituals and claimed that people could only truly connect to the divine through those secrets. They had little doctrine, but focused on trying to get people to experience something, to feel something through their practices. And, of course, they appealed to people because they enabled them to think they knew secrets that others did not know. So they were on the inside and others were on the outside.

Paul co-opted their ideas here. God has all knowledge and all wisdom. In his wisdom and knowledge he revealed the mystery. In other words, Paul was saying, "You don't need to go looking for some hidden mysterious knowledge, because God has revealed it." Paul says God has revealed this mystery, past tense. It has already happened. It happened in Christ. Note that God has done so with "all wisdom and understanding." In other words, he has revealed all we need to know. He has not left anything out. God has not partially revealed the mystery of his will, he has given us what we need to know. All of it. He has given us what we need to understand to know him completely, to experience his life, and to do his will.

In 2 Peter 1:3 the apostle Peter wrote that God's "divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness." There is no further revelation, no further giving of blessings that is needed. He has given us everything we need. It is a done deal.

This idea that God has revealed to us something that is otherwise not knowable is a fundamental point of departure from our culture's basic beliefs. One of the tenets of the supposed Age of Enlightenment that has so influenced our society is that there is no such thing as revelation from God. The premise is we can only know what we gain through our own senses and reasoning. The claim is that we live in a closed system consisting of matter, randomness and the laws of physics. There is nothing possible beyond that. This is not a proven fact. It is a presupposition.

Paul's claim is that God has communicated with us. He has made known to people the mystery of his will. That is a blatant claim that we do not live in a closed system, that God has, in fact intervened and revealed a mystery, a truth that we would never have been able to discover using only our human senses and reasoning alone. This is a fundamental divide in the way we approach all of life. If there is no God or if God either does not or cannot communicate with people, if we live in a truly closed system, then we are left purely to our own devices to figure out life. But if God has spoken, then we are in a completely different world. We can know how we should live and we can have hope and meaning. We can know about the most important mysteries of life.

I have heard and read repeatedly recently that our nation has never been as divided as it is right now. Some of that is actually just an attack on our current President, a claim that he is the one dividing us. But the division in our nation is deep, and it pre-dated President Trump by many decades. We see division over morality, sexuality, marriage and the family, the sanctity of life and many others. The interesting thing is that on all these many points of conflict we see the same lineup on the sides. It is like we have been divided into two camps that disagree over these many issues. While there seem to be many points of conflict, the truth is that all of them come from one source. They are actually all about one thing. They are all about whether God has revealed the mystery of his will. Has God broken into this world and spoken?

If he has, then we know how we are supposed to behave. We know what is moral and what isn't, what limits there are on sexuality, what marriage should be, and all the rest. But if he hasn't, then what do we have? We have nothing but a lot of opinions of people, none of which have any more validity than any others.

In this vast sea of ignorance, in the darkness, we look to supposed human experts who know more than the rest of us we think. But it turns out that human experts have, generally, a terrible track record. In October the experts said that this winter would be very warm in the west and drought conditions would deepen in Southern California. How did that turn out?

We're in global warming, right? Oh, no, it's climate change, clearly because it is no warmer here. Here's an interesting note. Some solar physicists who study the sun's cycles are now saying not the next solar cycle (which is approximately 11 years), but the one after it, will be a particularly severe down cycle. They believe it will lead to a "mini ice age" beginning around 2030, much like what happened during what is known as the Maunder Minimum from 1645 to 1715 that produced bitterly cold winters. Frankly, I'm not real confident in the "experts" on much of anything these days. So are we left just to our own opinions? Honestly, I'm not all that confident I know the best either. Is there any hope? There is, if God has truly spoken.

Why should we believe that God actually has revealed truth? Ultimately that is going to require faith to believe. But there are two facts that are the strongest evidence for believing this to be true. First there is fulfilled prophecy. There are statements made by biblical prophets who claimed that God revealed truth to them about events that would happen in the future. When these statements proved to be true, that points to a source of information outside our supposedly closed system. One established fact about humans is that we do not know the future.

Before the Super Bowl I talked to several friends about how we thought the game would go. I said, "I believe the Rams have the better team, but especially in the post season I would not pick against Bill Belichick and Tom Brady. I especially think the matchup of quarterbacks, Brady versus Jared Goff who has never played in a Super Bowl, heavily favors New England." My

prediction was exactly right. New England did win and, by the admission of Rams coach Sean McVey, he was out-coached by Belichick.

So I was accurate about what was going to happen in the future. Does that mean I have some super human abilities or sources of information? No, it just means that I can learn from past events and expect a likely outcome. My true ability to predict future events is roughly the same as if I blindfolded myself and threw darts at a board of possible outcomes. When it comes to predictions I am wrong at least as much as I'm right, usually more often.

I also was talking to friends about the Padres. There were lots of reports that they were making a serious effort to sign one of the two top free agents, Manny Machado and Bryce Harper. This would be unprecedented for the perpetually pitiful Padres. I said they would be the same old Padres and wouldn't do anything. How did that prophecy turn out? I was totally wrong, as the Padres shocked the world by signing Machado to a historic contract.

Compare that with Daniel, who correctly told the course of history hundreds of years before the events. He prophesied correctly about the succession of world powers, from Babylon to Medo-Persia to Greece to Rome. He made detailed prophecies of events that occurred in the rivalries between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids that were so accurate that current scholars claim that what he said had to have been written after the fact, because there is no way a person could know those things before they happened. In a closed system, the critics are right. But Daniel claimed he wasn't in a closed system, but that God revealed these things to him.

The second and most powerful evidence that God has spoken, of course, is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those are events that took place in history that prove God has entered this world to reveal himself. He broke into this supposedly closed system.

But what, exactly, is the mystery God has made known? There is some grammar here that is somewhat difficult to unravel. The NIV says the mystery of his will was purposed in Christ, "to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment, to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." That's not a literal translation of what Paul wrote. Literally, Paul wrote that what God has revealed is the administration of the fullness of times, summing up all things in Christ. This tells us a couple of crucial truths.

First, God is administering the times. In other words, God has a plan for history. History is not random, but is actually going in a specific direction. Again, this is very different than our cultural elites believe. They assert that what happens is random. Bertrand Russell, the philosopher, wrote in his book *A Free Man's Worship*, "Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving...his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms." George Norman Clark was a professor of history at Cambridge University last century. He said, "There is no

secret and no plan in history to be discovered. I do not believe that any future consummation could make sense of the irrationalities of preceding ages.”

But Paul claimed that God has revealed that he is guiding history and directing it to a conclusion, and that in the end it will make sense. Frederick Beuchner asserted that Paul was right. In his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, he wrote, “Life is not just a series of events causing other events as haphazardly as a break shot in pool causes the billiard balls to careen off in all directions...Life has a plot the way a novel has a plot...events are, somehow or other, leading somewhere.”

This is not something we can determine just using human reasoning. When I look at history it does not appear to be linear. It looks awfully random, and it certainly doesn't appear to be headed in some clear, purposeful direction. We know that history and our lives are going somewhere coherent and meaningful because God has revealed this to us.

Oddly, many people, maybe most, in our society believe that there is some sort of direction to life. You hear it a lot, “everything happens for a reason.” That means there's a plan. In his book, *The Good Life*, the late Charles Colton wrote of a video he saw in which people were randomly interviewed at a mall. They were asked if they believed their lives were directed by some power beyond themselves. He said he was amazed that no one said no. Instead, they “almost unanimously expressed their confidence that some force was guiding their lives.” Many, maybe most of us, have a nagging sense that life is going somewhere that it is intended to go.

Let's assume that what Paul asserted is true, that life is going toward a planned conclusion. But what is that conclusion? Paul says it is the summing up of all things in Christ. Everything in heaven and on earth in the end is aiming at Jesus Christ. In Colossians 1:16 Paul said that everything that exists was made through Christ and for him. All of creation is eventually going to be about Jesus, and will only be restored to true beauty and harmony in him. In other words, all of life is about him.

John was given revelations of the future. His visions are recorded in the book of Revelations. In that book in 5:11-13 he recorded this: “Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying, ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise.’ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever.’” The Lamb who was slain is Jesus. And that is the endgame of all of history.

This has some very personal implications for us. It has to do with what our lives are about. Our unshakeable, natural default is to believe that our lives are about us. Truth be told, we kind of think that all the world should be about us. To be told our own lives are not about us, not about our purposes and our own personal desires, is inconceivable to us. Yet that is exactly what this passage implies. The implication that everything in heaven and earth is summed up in Christ is that our lives are also summed up in Christ, not in ourselves. That is radical.

GOD WORKS OUT EVERYTHING

Verse 11 tells us something even more astounding, something that, once again, we know only because God has revealed the mystery to us. It is that our being chosen by God is a part of his plan and that plan is going to happen because God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.”

The word that jumps out at me in that statement is “everything.” God works out every single thing according to his purpose and his plan. Nothing that happens is a threat to his purpose. But here we run into some philosophical problems. Doesn't that make God the author of unimaginable evil? Was the horrible massacre that happened in Rwanda in the 1990's something that God worked out? Did God work out the terrible attacks on 9/11 back in 2001, ending the lives of thousands of people? Did God work out the tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands?

This question produces some real conundrums for us. I thought back to one of those now humorous incidents that happened to us a couple of years ago. We were planning to travel back to the Midwest to attend the wedding of a niece. We talked to our family back in Minnesota and they said we had two options. We could stay at the home of some friends of theirs in their town, or we could stay in the hotel in the town where the wedding party was staying that was a few miles away. We discussed it and initially thought the hotel would be the better option, for it had air conditioning where the home of friends did not. So I looked into booking a room in the hotel for a couple of nights. I was shocked. I had figured in a small town in Iowa a place that was nothing special, a 3-star kind of place, would be quite affordable. It was way more than I expected. We decided it was foolish to spend hundreds of dollars when we had an option of a free place to stay. That decision, of course, led to the now infamous bat encounter and then to our receiving rabies shots. Do you have any idea how expensive rabies shots are? Insurance covered most of it, but we still ended up with over \$2,000 in out-of-pocket expenses. Because we wanted to not be foolish with our money, to be wise, in an effort to maybe save \$300 or \$400, we ended up costing ourselves over \$2,000 and a boat load of inconvenience. So my question is, was God working all that out in conformity with the purpose of his will? It is pretty hard for me to see how that had anything to do with God's plan, purpose and working.

Proverbs 16:9 says, “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.” That says we were making our plans about where we would stay, but God determined

our steps. So God wanted us to have a close encounter with a bat and end up having 8 shots apiece? One of those shots was a gamma globulin shot costing thousands of dollars all by itself. Wow, I don't get it. But Proverbs 16:33 says, "the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." So God determined who won the coin toss in the Super Bowl?

This is one of those issues that is a mystery that God has chosen not to reveal, so we don't have all the answers. The danger here is for us to think we know more than we do or to come up with pat answers to every question. When you are dealing with an Almighty, infinite Being, at some point you're going to hit a wall you can't get past. We can't put God into a finite box and wrap him up with a human understanding bow. We will have to accept that God is sovereign, that he is directing history, including our lives, that nothing can thwart his plan, and that we don't know exactly how all that works out in the circumstances of our lives.

Oxford University philosopher Basil Mitchell tells the parable of the resistance leader. Imagine that you are in Nazi occupied France in World War II and you want to join the resistance movement against the Germans. One evening in a local pub a stranger introduces himself to you. He tests you to determine your trustworthiness, and finally reveals to you that he is the local resistance leader. He explains what your duties will involve and gives you the chance to go no further. He issues a stern warning: if you join, your life will be at risk. This is the only meeting you will have with him. After this, you will receive orders and will have to follow them without question, often being completely in the dark as to the whys of what you are doing, and always with the terrifying fear that your trust might be betrayed. Sometimes what the leader is doing is apparent, helping members of the resistance. But other times it is not obvious at all. He shows up in a Gestapo uniform arresting partisans. What you don't know is that out of sight he is actually helping them escape. But always you must trust and follow orders without question, no matter what happens. "The leader knows best," you say. But it is only after the war that the secrets are revealed, and sense is made of all the events.

God is the leader. We are in the war. We don't know all that he is doing, and frankly, sometimes it is confusing, even confounding. We don't understand what he is up to. But he is like the resistance leader. He is trustworthy and his plan is moving forward, so we trust and know that some day the war will be over and all the secrets will come to light.

GOD'S PRAISE IS THE POINT

Verse 12 tells us the point of it all. It is that we, who hope in Christ, might be for the praise of God's glory. In other words, the goal of all that is happening in the world, all that is happening in our lives, is that we would praise the glory of God.

It's not hard to imagine someone objecting that if Christ made everything, but he did it for himself, to serve his purposes, and that the point of it all is to bring glory to him, that sounds like he's awfully selfish. So how are we to understand this? Let's try a little thought experiment.

Imagine a brilliant, noble and good scientist who creates a powerful computer based on some amazing artificial intelligence software. This AI software is designed to solve some of the most intractable problems of the human race. But let's envision this being that classic sci fi tale where the AI computer begins to decide that it knows better than the scientist who developed it. As a result it begins operating on its own, and rather than doing that which is noble and good, it begins doing damage to people. If that scientist insists that his computer follow his direction and operates to carry out his purposes, is he being selfish? Far from it. What he is doing is looking out for people and trying to protect the good. For him to allow his creation to go off on its own and do that which is not noble and good would, in fact, be evil.

Because Christ is the embodiment of good, the epitome of it, for everything to be summed up in him is to say everything will be summed up in that which is good. For us to live for his praise is for us to live to honor that which is true good, that which is best. For it to go any other direction is to go toward that which is not good, and that which is not good is evil.

Maybe you've noticed that we human beings seem to have a built in desire for happy endings. Stories with unhappy endings leave us unhappy ourselves. Here's what we must remember: ***For life to have a happy ending, it must be summed up in Christ.*** If it is summed up in anything else, it will not be happy, it will be tragic.

IMPLICATIONS

KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL

Golf has never been a favorite entertainment for me. My Dad loved golf and coached it at the high school where he taught. Somehow it just never floated my boat. I am sure that at least one factor in that is that I am and always have been terrible at the game. That is also true of pretty much every sport I played and I loved them anyway, but I am particularly bad at golf. I recall one time when I was in high school I went out to play a round of golf with my dad. At one point when I was trying to hit a fairway shot, I lined up to hit the ball, trying to remember the things my dad had taught me. I swung and smacked the ball with the club. I hit it pretty hard, which, in this case was not a good thing, because it didn't go straight down the fairway where I was aiming. Instead it went perpendicular to my aimed direction. It flew almost straight sideways, so it went screaming across the fairway, into the next fairway over and hit a man in the leg who was trying to play that hole. My poor dad was mortified. I was ready to swear off golf right there.

One of the frustrating things about that game is when you are to make a shot, the ball isn't going anywhere. It's not moving. It's just sitting there, motionless. It's not like baseball, where you are trying to hit a moving ball with a round bat. It should be child's play to hit a stationary golf ball with a club. But in my days I've actually swung and missed a time or two, and more

commonly I've topped the ball so it just bounces 30 or 40 feet, or as in the aforementioned incident it screams off in some bizarre direction. Those things happen for one reason. I have the strangest tendency to stop looking at the ball when I start to swing. I look up to see where I think the ball is going to go when I crush it.

The number one rule is, look at the ball and keep looking at the ball because the point is to hit the ball. There is no need to look up to see where you think the ball is going because once you've hit it there is absolutely nothing you can do to control its flight path. So do the one thing you can do. Look at the ball so you can hit it squarely. In life I need to do the same thing. Keep looking at what I'm trying to hit. Keep your eye on the ball, Rick. What is it that I'm trying to hit? It should be what God wants me to hit. And that is summing up everything in Christ. The whole thing is not about me being comfy, cozy and happy. It is about Jesus and about glorifying God.

I have a hard time remembering that. I really want God to sum up everything in Rick Myatt. But that's not what he's doing, and that's a good thing. If that were what God was doing then I guarantee you that life would be hell on earth for everyone.

So these verses remind me, it's about Jesus. The whole thing. Every now and then you hear people say, "Everything happens for a reason." That's true. The reason is that Jesus Christ would be glorified. Everything that happens in this world, including everything in my life, is going to be summed up in Jesus. So I need to keep my eye on that goal.

TRUST THE PLAN

In Job 1, repeated catastrophes pummeled that godly man named Job. He had every reason to wallow in self-pity or to lash out in rage at the bitter events that had decimated his life. In Chapter 2 the hit parade continued and even Job's health was ruined. In 2:9 his wife said to him, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die." Wow, now there's some encouragement from a supportive wife. But we need to remember those profound words that Job spoke in response to the devastation of his life. Understand that you and I have never come close to going through the tragedies that Job suffered. But in 1:21 he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised."

Job believed, based on those words, that God was working out everything according to his will. He didn't say, "I know that God couldn't have done anything about all of this, he had nothing to do with it, so I can still trust him." He acknowledged that it was God who had taken away. God was at work. Though he could not possibly understand what God was doing in all of this suffering he responded by saying, "May the name of the Lord be praised." He still trusted, he

still aimed at praising God, even though he could see no evidence whatsoever of God's goodness in his situation. He was trusting in God's plan.

We will all experience events that crush us, that leave us wondering how God could let this happen. But we need to continue to believe that God is working everything out according to his good will. We need to join Job in saying, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised."

The great British preacher, Martin Lloyd Jones, wrote, "There is a plan for every life in the mind of God. We must never regard our lives...as accidental." Our lives are not an accident. We don't always know how it all works, but we must trust the Resistance Leader even when we don't understand what he's doing. When we do we can have great peace, and great confidence.

Things don't always work out so neatly. They surely didn't for Job. But it was one more reminder for me that whatever happens, good or bad, we need to trust that God is working everything out for his good purpose.

Amy Medina is, with her husband, a missionary in Liberia. She recently wrote a blog about the fact that several families that includes her kids' dearest friends have announced they are leaving Liberia. She pondered the question of whether it is fair for her to impose on her children a situation that may cause them pain. She wrote, "I guess that's the thing about parenting, we make all these choices for these small people under our care and they don't get any say in it. We choose where they will live, how they will be educated, how many siblings they will have, who they will be friends with. None of this seems like a big deal when they are little... but then they get bigger and smarter and they start to realize that some of the choices we made for them have difficult repercussions. Our enthusiastic, 'It will be worth it,' starts to sound more hollow, to them and to us, because the truth is, we really don't know if it will be. I'm realizing that as much as I want and try to write my kids' stories for them, I really only get to make the basic outline. I can create the setting and even write in (some) characters, but they control the perspective, which is really what makes or breaks a story. And ultimately, I must trust that there's an Author who's a whole lot bigger than I am, and who loves them a whole lot more than I do, who is doing most of the writing behind the scenes." She is finding that she has peace, because God is working all things according to his plan to sum up everything in Christ.